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## INTERSECTIONALITY AND CRIME: REFLECTIONS FROM FEMALE EX-INMATES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

*Intersectionality was used as a lens in this article to analyse the recounted experiences of 20 former female inmates (prisoners) of correctional centres (prisons) in South Africa. It was found that if stratification identifiers such as race, class and gender are simultaneously analysed in conjunction with female crime, distinctive trends of criminality can be identified. Fraud and shoplifting were the two most common offences for which women in this study were sentenced and the majority of them had relatively short sentences. It was found that the types of crime women have committed and their experiences whilst being incarcerated were influenced by their access to financial resources which, in turn, was simultaneously influenced by their educational levels and racial category. Multiple positions of power and hardship were revealed in this study.*

**Keywords:** *Female ex-inmates; intersectionality; race; gender; class; crime; South Africa.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Globally the incarceration rate for women is much lower than for men (International Centre for Prison Studies, 2008: 4; Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2003: 1; Loesche, 2017: np; World Female Imprisonment List (4<sup>th</sup> edition) [sa]; Steyn & Booyens, 2017: 33). In recent years the United States of America (USA) was the country with the second highest number of inmates and prison population rate after Seychelles (698 per 100 000 of the national population rate based on information available in 2015) (Walmsley, [sa]: 2). Yet, the female inmates constituted only 9.8% of the overall USA prison population in 2016 (World Prison Brief, [sa]), although Kenya and Malaysia also have similar high percentages of female incarceration (Prinsloo & Hesselink, 2015: 67). Luyt (2008) provides a historical overview of incarceration in South Africa, indicating a growth in the female inmate population from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The highest female inmate population as a percentage of the overall inmate population was recorded during the apartheid<sup>1</sup> years when many women were detained as political prisoners in South Africa. The number of female inmates gradually declined from an all-time high of 9.5% in 1958/1959, until 2006/2007 when the female inmate population “remained constant at 2.1% of the total prison population” for a few years (Luyt, 2008: 305). It was expected to stay at less than 2.5%; however, in 2014 the female inmate population was 2.5% of the total correctional centres population (Institute for Criminal Policy Research [sa]) and 2.6% of the total inmates’ population in 2017 (own calculations based on the data of the Department of Correctional Services Annual Report for 2016/ 2017: 25). Moreover, the average total correctional centres population decreased from 163 049 in 2006/2007 (Luyt, 2008: 305) to 161 054 in 2016/2017 (Department of Correctional Services, 2017: 25) implying that the number of female inmates is increasing slowly, compared to the number of male inmates (see also Dastille, 2010:97). The slight increase in female incarcerations has been linked with economic crimes committed by women in South Africa (Hesselink & Mostert, 2014: 36; Prinsloo & Hesselink, 2015: 68). This may be due to more women having opportunity to commit certain crimes, such as white-collar crime. Also, if it is assumed that poverty drives women to

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economic crimes such as petty theft, the well-documented fact that women are significantly poorer than men in South Africa when comparing various indicators (Rogan, 2016:988-989, 993-1000) should be kept in mind. Yet, the female inmate population is still minuscule in comparison to the male inmate population, making them a vulnerable minority (Luyt & Du Preez, 2010: 89).

Various reasons are offered for this huge discrepancy between the number of incarcerated men and women. One such explanation is that women do not have the same opportunities as men to commit crime. For example, white-collar crime presupposes formal employment or at least access to resources to create opportunities for a crime such as fraud. In this regard, Luyt (2008: 306) reported that in 2007 a large percentage of female inmates (40%) in South Africa were incarcerated for crimes related to economic activities and Prinsloo & Hesselink (2015: 68) reported an even higher percentage (45%) in 2011. However, fraud and forgery (forms of white-collar crime) form only one of seven sub-categories of such criminal activities (Department of Correctional Services, 2015: 30) and it is therefore difficult to determine the exact type of misdemeanours female inmates are incarcerated for based on the Correctional Services report alone. The 2014 report did not provide a gender breakdown of the crime categories, but economic crime made up 21% of the crimes people were incarcerated for in South Africa (Department of Correctional Services, 2015: 30). However, Artz, Hoffman-Wanderer, and Moulton (2012: 38–39) found that 20 per cent of the respondents in their study in two different correctional centres in the Western Cape reported fraud/forgery as their offence, and 14% reported shoplifting and theft. In 2007, 43.8% (own calculation based on provided figures) of female inmates were incarcerated for aggressive crimes (Luyt, 2008: 306) and in the Artz et al (2012: 38–39) study, 32% of the respondents were incarcerated for murder. The reason for the high percentage of women found guilty on murder charges in South Africa may be that women are the aggressors, but women may also act in self-defence against abusive partners (Haffejee et al, 2006). However, it has been noted that women generally commit non-violent crimes (Johnson, Carney, Kline, Browne, and Wechsberg, 2012: np; Kelly, Hunter, Daily, and Ramaswamy, 2017: 16; Allen, 2017: 11). Another older argument to explain the low number of female offenders is the so-called chivalrous treatment that they receive from the criminal justice system. This is sometimes reflected in the reluctance by the police to arrest women and their refusal to use force on them if they resist arrest. The justification for this behaviour is that women are not regarded as a threat to society (Barkan, 1997: 481) and the desire of the Criminal Justice System to protect women offenders (Lieber, Beaudry-Cyr, Peck, and Mack, 2018: np). We did not find any support for the so-called chivalrous treatment in this study, most likely because convicted women were interviewed.

It is self-evident that it is impossible to understand the types of crime women commit by studying statistical reports only, but the much lower incarceration rates contributed to female inmates receiving much less attention from researchers. Yet there is a renewed research interest in female inmates, especially in the last decade, on the African continent (Artz & Hoffman-Wanderer, 2017; Artz & Rotmann, 2015; Linonge-Fontebo & Rabe, 2015; Prinsloo & Hesselink, 2015; Hesselink & Mostert, 2014; Dastile, 2010; Luyt, 2010). In South Africa female inmates as mothers of small children received specific attention in the literature (Luyt, 2008; Hesselink and Dastile, 2010; Vetten, 2008) but other aspects of female incarceration are also attracting more interest (Agboola, 2015; Artz et al, 2012; Gopal, 2015; Haffejee et al, 2006). The aim of this article is to contribute to this growing body of literature by focusing on the reflections of recently incarcerated women on aspects of gender, race and types of crime, including access to financial resources. An intersectional approach will inform this article as explained next.

## INTERSECTIONALITY

The interrelatedness of gender, race and class has long been acknowledged and it has been argued that the intersections or combined effects should be examined (Bell, 2009; Belknap, 1996). In the case of criminal behaviour the intersection of such forms of stratification is extremely relevant as argued by Burgess-Proctor (2006: 28):

“to advance an understanding of gender, crime, and justice that achieves universal relevance and is free from the shortcomings of past ways of thinking, feminist criminologists must examine linkages between inequality and crime using an intersectional theoretical framework that is informed by multiracial feminism.”

The author argues that multiracial feminism sees gender as socially constructed and regards different sources of inequality (e.g. race, ableism or discrimination against people with disabilities, sexuality and age) to occur simultaneously. It is further argued that people experience oppression and privilege at the same time, in other words “no individual or group can be entirely privileged or entirely oppressed” (Burgess-Proctor, 2006: 36). This latter point is particularly relevant to the reported cases of racism highlighted below.

The intersection of gender with racial and economic inequalities plays a significant role in shaping people’s criminal behaviour (Bell, 2009: 14). As stated by White and Haines (2001: 19), “the unique position of black women in the structure of power relations in society has profound effects not shared by their white counterparts”. This observation may be said to be true of the experiences, past and present, of women in South Africa, especially black South African women (see also Dastile, 2010). The historical disadvantages experienced by black (including coloured<sup>2</sup> and Indian) South African women (Andrews, 1999:430), may be the reason for the high representation of this group of people in the statistics on criminal activities in South Africa. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s, “[b]lack women constituted 98.5% of the female prisoners, while black male prisoners represented approximately 75% of the male prisoner population” (Filippi, 2016: np). There are distinctive ways in which gender and race intersect to shape the criminal behaviour of people, especially in a country with such a long history of racial and gender discrimination as South Africa. Thus, the criminal behaviour of a poor, black South African woman is often different from that of an equally poor, white South African woman or any other person who does not share the former’s attributes in terms of class, gender or racial characteristics.

It is generally accepted that there are both gender and racial differences in criminal offending. In the USA it was observed that race is the second major indicator of criminal offending (Bell, 2009: 1). According to Gabbidon (2007: 11), such studies maintained that, for varied reasons, racial minorities, including women, were more criminally inclined than the other racial/ethnic groups. Consistent with the discourse on the intersectionality of race, gender, class and crime, Bell (2009) points out that there is a debate in the social sciences as to whether black people commit more crime, or whether they are simply targeted by the criminal justice system.

However, the situation in South Africa is different. Haffejee et al (2006) found in their study on female inmates in Gauteng that their sample was very similar to the racial breakdown of the general female population in Gauteng. According to Dastile (2011: 296), the racial composition of female inmates in South Africa in August 2010 indicates that 70% of the inmates were black, 20% coloured, 9% white and 1% Asian. Johnson et al (2012: np) report a slightly different racial composition of female inmates in South African correctional centres in 2010, namely 68% black, 8% white and 21% coloured (these slight differences are most likely due to the fluid nature of

correctional centres' population with regular releases and intakes of inmates). On the other hand, the statistics for the general population of South African women indicate 79% black, 9% white, and 9% coloured (Johnson et al, 2012: np) (and the remaining number of people are of Asian/Indian descent). In contrast to Bell's (2009) observation that in the USA black women may be targeted by the criminal justice system, the statistics quoted above indicate that there is an overrepresentation of coloured women and underrepresentation of black women in the South African criminal statistics. However, whether the overrepresentation of coloured women in crime in South Africa is the result of them being targeted by the criminal justice system, whether they have more opportunities for crime, whether they are most disadvantaged or whether a combination of these factors or other factors contribute to this high incarceration rate, remains a subject for discussion and further research.

However, intersectional experience involves more than only linking racial categories with frequency of incarceration. Individuals' identities are multifaceted – for example, a woman's identity is linked to her race, ethnicity, class and sexuality. Simpson and Gibbs (2006: 269) explain how the race, gender and class of offenders influence their experiences of crime:

“Race, class and gender intersections affected participation in illegal activities (e.g., who gets involved in drugs and sex work); the kind of activities that occurs (e.g., who does what and with whom); economics (earnings for services); where the activities takes place; relations with the surrounding community; and who gets hassled by the police.”

In other words, committing a crime, the type of crime committed, where and how the crime is committed and the gender of the offender all play significant roles in criminal offending. Race and social class create distinct cultural frames of reference while socioeconomic experiences also shape how women perceive family relations when growing up. These early experiences affect how women comprehend and respond to aspects such as battering in their adult relationships and also to criminal activity.

Heimer (1995: 140–173) offers an interactionist explanation of how, in the USA, gender, class and race affect motivational pathways to delinquency, for example definitions of favourable risk-taking, self-esteem and school grades. Heimer's study reveals that, although risk-taking is directly related to the delinquency of men and women, risk-taking has different implications for men and women. Heimer (1995: 153) observes that women have favourable risk definitions when their self-esteem is low, whereas the opposite is true for men.

The intersectionality of gender, race, class and crime is evident in the work of Deming (in Chigwada-Bailey, 2004: 183) who contends that women have fewer choices than men; racial minorities have fewer choices than whites Americans; while the poor have fewer choices than the wealthy. Analogically, poor, black women and women who belong to other racial minority groups will have access to fewer choices as compared to wealthy white males (Chigwada-Bailey, 2004: 183).

The term intersectionality illuminates how identities, situations and different contexts in which men and women find themselves render them more susceptible to abuse and discrimination. By focusing on intersectionality, it becomes clearer how discriminatory systems precipitate the inequalities that influence the position of women, people of different races and ethnic groups, as well as marginalised groups so as to fully comprehend their varied experiences. The gender, race, ethnicity and class of people constitute their multiple identities, and individually shape their

experiences socially, economically and politically. These characteristics of individuals may also operate simultaneously in people's lives, and in multiples, thereby creating a greater variety of experiences than they would ordinarily have had if the characteristics had operated separately (Joseph, 2006: 142–143).

Intersectionality has been severely criticised from various academic sectors (Gouws, 2017:22), but much of this critique is based on this misguided notion of simply adding certain identities (disabilities, religion, age) to discover who it the “most oppressed”. Intersectionality does not entail simply adding the different systems of oppression (such as the trinity of race, class and gender or triple oppression of black women) as was often done during the apartheid years (De la Rey, 1997: 7), but a deeper understanding of lived reality with all the complexities it entails (Levine-Rasky, 2011: 240). Intersectionality highlights how people experience specific forms of hardship based on their unique positions and the experience of such disadvantages is thus more than just adding the different forms of discrimination (Anthias, 2013: 126). Hence, a more nuanced view develops as the relational aspects of social positions and the centrality of power relations become visible in the multiple positions people take on in their daily lives (Dhamoon, 2011: 230). When multiple systems of oppression are taken into account, there are seldom “pure victims or oppressors” (Levine-Rasky, 2011: 244).

The multiple ways in which the gender, race and class of the participants of this study intersected with the crimes that they committed are discussed further in this article, but first the methodology used to obtain the data is described.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research design was used for this study. Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with female ex-inmates in Pretoria, South Africa. The qualitative methodology that was used for this study is of vital importance in understanding the intersection between gender, race, class and crime, because it is considered a better method than quantitative methodology to be able to understand these concepts. According to Trahan (2010: 1): “... the purely quantitative methodologies are not well suited to studying intersectionality. The findings of qualitative research have lent a greater understanding to the intersection of race, class, gender and crime.”

The sampling consisted of both purposive and snowball sampling. The former method was initiated by approaching the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) to provide names and release dates of female inmates and some of these initial contacts then referred the interviewer to additional participants. Many of those participants who were initially approached did not want to take part in the study. Although the refusal to take part in the study may be regarded as a hurdle, it does underline that the principle of voluntary participation as an ethical consideration was observed, a feature that is far more difficult to ensure when conducting research on female inmates currently incarcerated (see Artz & Hoffman-Wanderer, 2017: 7).

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one-and-a-half hour, and were conducted in various places, such as in an office within the Department of Correctional Services, on a bench in a quiet corner of a mall and in the home of one of the participants. The key determining factors in the choice of interview venues were the safety of the research participants and the researcher, the ease with which the participants could access the research venues, and an environment conducive for interviews. Concerning the latter, it was particularly important not to conduct the interviews in noisy environments because it would have been difficult to decipher the recorded conversations for transcription after the interviews. Also, considering the sensitive nature of the study, crowded

places were not selected as the interview venues because they could have made the participants feel self-conscious and affected their openness during the interviews.

The data gathered were subjected to thematic analysis using open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Babbie, 2013: 397-398; Neuman, 2003: 42-44), in which themes were identified, interconnected and then built on respectively. This study is not representative of the views of all female ex-inmates in South Africa because a random sample was not drawn, hence the findings cannot be generalised.

Research ethics were observed in this study by ensuring that the research participants were not exposed to intentional harm; their privacy and the confidentiality of the information that they provided were assured and honoured. This was done for instance by using pseudonyms, conducting the interviews in places that were not crowded, ensuring that participation was voluntary and that participants understood their right to withdraw from the research at any stage. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa for the study.

An unstructured interview schedule was used, but not strictly followed, to guide the interviews. The first author of this article conducted all the interviews. Being a black woman from an African country other than South Africa, placed her in a unique relation with the participants since she is not so closely connected to the historical racial politics of the country, but not seen as entirely disconnected from racial struggles. The only shared language between the interviewer and the research participants was English, hence all the interviews were conducted in English. All the participants were comfortable to express themselves in English, even though it is not their home language. The quotations below were not grammatically revised, but kept in their original format.

## **GENDER, SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND CORRECTIONAL CENTRE EXPERIENCES**

It will be argued below that the types of crimes the research participants had committed and the experiences of the participants in correctional centres were related to their socio-economic standing in society prior to conviction. When analysing the 20 participants' biographic detail in terms of crimes committed, educational levels and racial category, it reveals remarkably consistent patterns that give credence to the logic of intersectionality (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Key characteristics of research participants**

<b>Pseudo-nyms</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Type of crime</b>	<b>Language + race</b>	<b># Children</b>	<b>Relationship</b>	<b>Educational level</b>
<b>Margaret</b>	26	Public drinking	Sepedi, black	2	Single	Grade 11
<b>Gina</b>	22	Assault	Ndebele, black	2	Single	Grade 10
<b>Emily</b>	47	Fraud	Greek, white	2	Married	Grade 10
<b>Valerie</b>	29	Shoplifting	Zulu, white	0	Single	Grade 11
<b>Nomsa</b>	26	Fraud	Zulu, black	1	Single	Tertiary Education
<b>Micaela</b>	50	Fraud	Afrikaans, white	0	Single	Tertiary Education
<b>Juliet</b>	23	Shoplifting	Afrikaans, coloured	0	Single	Grade 9
<b>Duduzile</b>	30	Assault	Sepedi, black	2	Single	Grade 12
<b>Gail</b>	37	Shoplifting	Tsonga, black	0	Divorced	Grade 12
<b>Lebohang</b>	23	Fraud	Sepedi, black	0	Single	Tertiary Education
<b>Freda</b>	46	Fraud	Afrikaans, white	2	Divorced	Tertiary Education
<b>Cecelia</b>	36	Fraud	Afrikaans, white	3	Divorced	Grade 12
<b>Melissa</b>	53	Possession of illegal substances	Afrikaans, white	0	Separated	Tertiary Education
<b>Geraldine</b>	63	Shoplifting	Tswana, black	5	Widowed	Grade 10
<b>Margarita</b>	61	Shoplifting	Zulu, black	3	Single	Grade 12
<b>Cayla</b>	49	Fraud	Afrikaans, white	2	Married	Grade 10
<b>Amelia</b>	52	Fraud	Afrikaans, white	0	Single	Grade 12
<b>Ashley</b>	46	Fraud	Afrikaans, white	2	Divorced	Grade 12
<b>Elizabeth</b>	33	Murder	Ndebele, black	0	Separated	Grade 4
<b>Mercy</b>	57	Fraud	Afrikaans, white	0	Widowed	Tertiary Education

Nine of the participants were white (all of them with Afrikaans as their home language), ten were black (speaking different African languages as their home language) and one was coloured (with Afrikaans as her home language). One black woman was convicted of murder, another black woman of public drinking, two black women were convicted on charges of assault, one white woman of possession of illegal substances, five black women were convicted of shoplifting and the remaining ten participants were found guilty on charges of fraud. Five of the six women with a tertiary education were convicted of fraud, the remaining ones convicted of fraud either completed high school (Grade 12) or Grade 10. At the other end of the formal educational scale in this study, it was found that one black woman had completed only Grade 4, was found guilty on charges of murder and the coloured woman who completed Grade 9 was found guilty of shoplifting.

Therefore, the racial category of the participants, their formal educational levels and the crimes they were convicted of show remarkable patterns, with all the white participants, bar one, having completed high school or a tertiary qualification, and all of those with a tertiary education (regardless of race) were convicted of fraud and one of possession of illegal substances.

If one analyses the above in terms of the participants' income prior to incarceration, the patterns are even more distinct. The income of the women differed substantially. One black woman and the only coloured woman (Juliet) had no income before being incarcerated. All the women with low monthly incomes (between R800 and R2 000 per month) were incarcerated for shoplifting and all of them were black. The women incarcerated for fraud earned between R9 000 and R23 000 per month, with one woman, Mercy, earning R250 000 (see more details about her financial position in the discussion below). Moreover, the majority of the participants are single, divorced or widowed, and many of them have dependent children.

These varied levels of formal schooling, low income amongst certain offenders, especially amongst black participants, are similar to the findings by Dastile (2010: 100). Although both these studies are based on qualitative research, it does give an indication of expected trajectories that were also found generally in other studies on female criminality in South Africa (cf. Steyn & Booyens, 2017: 35).

As explained by Bell (2009), the intersection between the race and class of the participants is reflected in the types of crimes they committed. This study found that there were two broad categories of crimes the participants committed. The first category is a type of white-collar crime (fraud) and this was committed by participants who can be categorised as middle class in terms of educational qualifications and socio-economic status. Having a relatively high educational level and being employed, meant the women had access to money and the opportunities to commit fraud in their workplaces. The opportunities that the participants' class gave them regarding the type of crimes they committed supports Chigwada-Bailey's (2004) contention that poor, black women have fewer choices as compared to other people within different class and race categories. White-collar crime is generally regarded as the domain of the elite, however, it has been pointed out that people from lower classes commit white-collar crimes too (Newburn, 2013: 397–398; Chambliss and Hass, 2012: 332; Walsh, 2012: 234). This latter observation could only be linked to white women in this study in that one among them did not complete high school and another two only completed high school, yet they were convicted of this crime.

The second category of participants was those who had committed an act of shoplifting. This category consisted of participants with lower educational qualifications and poor socio-economic backgrounds. It is pertinent to point out that the former category is made up of, predominantly, white women while the latter category consisted of only black women; this dichotomy may not be unrelated to the historical antecedent of South Africa (Andrews, 1999: 430; Filippi, 2016: np) which gave the white population a socio-economic advantage over the black population. Although the apartheid era in South Africa has ended officially, much of its legacy is still present in the lives of many South Africans today. The combined influence that class and race exerts over female crime is reflected above, indicating that the two black participants who committed fraud had higher educational levels and a better socio-economic standing than those black participants who shoplifted, and that most of the white participants had better formal education and a higher socio-economic status than their black counterparts before they were incarcerated.



Chigwada-Bailey (2004: 183) found that black women's race, gender and class render them vulnerable to unequal treatment within the criminal justice system. Chigwada-Bailey's arguments suggest that offenders' experiences within the criminal justice system are dependent on their gender, race and class, with poor, black women at a disadvantage. In this study, the biographic detail and the crimes committed by the participants lend partial credence to this argument. However, the exclusion of class in the discussions of gender, race and crime creates a limited understanding because a broad examination of the interplay between the gender, race and class in relation to crime provides insights into the interrelated relationship between discrimination and privilege. For instance, the experiences of poor, white women may be perceived as privileged based on their race, but they may have experience discrimination based on their class and gender (Trahan, 2011: 2). Apart from just looking at the broad categories of crime, educational status, income and racial category, the section below reveal how levels of inequality intersect and lead women to particular forms of crime. The focus is on individual backgrounds, linking socio-economic status with correctional centre experiences and experiences of racial categorisation in correctional centres. This line of argument is in line with nuanced development in intersectionality (argued above) where relational aspects and the various social positions reveal multiple power relations in individual lives.

### **Poverty and crime**

All the white participants in the study had a middle-class background, as Michaela, a white Afrikaans speaking participant, narrates: "I come from a middle-class family. We were not rich, but we had just enough to live on. I had a happy and normal childhood." In contrast, many of the black participants linked their experiences of economic deprivation with their initial motivation for engaging in crime. Although these experiences of poverty are described on a familial level, the larger picture of high poverty levels amongst black South Africans form the background for these narratives: "When I started shoplifting around 18 years, I tell myself this is my level now. Or when my friend comes with a nice t-shirt, I say yoh,<sup>3</sup> I need that t-shirt, that makes me go do shoplifting" (Valerie).

Although Valerie was not suffering absolute deprivation, her family's fortunes changed dramatically with the death of her uncle who had looked well after his extended family. His widow chased them out of the comfortable house after his death and Valerie and her siblings henceforth lived with her grandmother in poverty. Valerie became a habitual shoplifter. Margarita, however, shoplifted out of necessity after she was retrenched from a large retail company in 1989 after working there for five years:

"Before my parents' death, they were financially responsible for me and my siblings. After their death, I became the breadwinner of the family, and that was when I started shoplifting, to feed myself and the children, to get food. The shoplifting started after my parents passed away - I have four siblings, I am the third born. At the time that I started shoplifting, my two elder siblings had left our parents' house to stay on their own, I was then the eldest in my parents' house. I was responsible for everything, rent, food and so on. I started shoplifting after my retrenchment."

Elizabeth also had severe financial and other difficulties starting when she was married off at the age of 13 and had her first child at the age of 14. Although her husband was also young, she eventually fled from her in-laws leaving her first child with them. She only managed to complete Grade 4 and worked as a cleaner before being accused of murder. She intervened between a fight where her sister's life was in danger, but she still served three years in a correctional centre for the killing of her sister's attacker. She has low job prospects and only manages to secure occasional shift work after being released from the correctional centre.

Although various people had experiences of poverty, it did not always affect people's educational performance:

"My mum when she left (her dad), she left even without a spoon. She left with all the kids. We are nine kids. The struggle was just gonna start rocking very hard. So, it was like how I grew up. Amazingly, we did quite well in school, all of us. Regardless of the circumstances, all the nine of us we did very well at school. Even though financially and school fees wise, food ... not even having breakfast to eat before going to school sometimes, but it never really affected us to that extent where we underperformed at school or something. It was hard. It was very difficult, but we pulled through, all of us" (Nomsa).

Nomsa worked as an accountant for four years before being accused of fraud. She did not serve a long sentence and at the time of the interview she was pursuing a different tertiary qualification from before.

Juliet, the only coloured participant in the study, had a very different upbringing. Her father and one brother passed away and she and her remaining siblings were raised by her mother. Juliet has been incarcerated on ten occasions already even though she was only 23 years old at the time of the interview. She grew up in a section of Cape Town that is notorious for its gangs and her decisions are linked up with the family and community influences:

"I got mixed up with the wrong friends when I was about 13 years old ... So, ja<sup>4</sup> I got caught up in drugs, alcohol, marijuana. I started selling drugs, pot and all that. You know, it led to a bad direction in my life. I was going away, maybe three to five months from the house. They will look for me, I'll be in prison. All this started around the age of 13. I was kind of afraid to tell my family that I am in prison, what would they say? What would they think? Would they even come and fetch me? So many things went wrong in the family at that point in time. After coming out of prison, I get back to my family. For the period of time that I am in prison, I will be clean, but the moment I get out...you know what I mean it's easy [to go back to drugs and alcohol] because in prison, you can't get drugs or say let me go to this dealer and get drugs, there's nothing like that. So, that was a good thing for me, but when I come out of prison, my whole body and soul tells me you know where to find it. So, I'll just start again. Prison was like a rehab. My sister, at a later stage, she started smoking as well, my elder sister. We were smoking crystal meth. We will smoke together. My mother will go to work and we will sell the things in the house, and stuff was not going well for my mother ... It's difficult getting a job because of my criminal record – possession of drugs, GBH [Great Bodily Harm], armed robbery ... you know, it's just bad, it's bad."

Despite the criminal environment, none of Juliet's family members have ever been incarcerated. Her mother eventually moved the entire family to Pretoria believing that it would provide a more conducive environment for her youngest daughter, Juliet. She has now been living a drug free life for a long time and she attributes her recovery to her mother's constant support. She now wants to look after her mother but finds it impossible to find employment given her background.

It is thus clear that for the one coloured and black participants, financial difficulties on an individual, family and community level had a composite effect in their lives. Given the racial history of South Africa where white people received preferential treatment in all aspects of life, being black, even though not specifically mentioned by any of them, intensified their economic vulnerability as they all grew up in impoverished communities with few opportunities for alternative life strategies. The connections between socio-economic circumstances and criminal activity continued during incarceration.

### **Financial power and perceptions in correctional centres**

The correctional centre experiences of the inmates in this study were found to be connected to their former socio-economic status. Participants with a higher socio-economic status enjoyed some benefits, which those who were not financially privileged did not. For instance, those in the former category could afford to buy things that made their sentence far more bearable than those in the latter category. The interplay between the socio-economic status of the participants and their experiences during incarceration is seen in the narratives of Amelia and Ashley: "We had to buy clothes, like tracksuit, and go to add to the one set of clothes that we were given in prison. We buy these from the inmates that are going home [leaving prison]" (Ashley).

"When your coffee and stuff is finished and the shop [inside prison] does not open, you must go and buy from other inmates ... so you go and buy sugar from them or whatever you need ... we [she and her co-accused] had a lot of money<sup>5</sup> to buy things in prison, since the shop [in prison] does not open always. It is supposed to open every two weeks, but that does not happen, that is why things get scarce and you get hungry. So, you buy things from other people [inmates]" (Amelia).

Some of the participants, particularly those who were well off financially, related the importance of family visits towards their physical wellbeing:

"On family visit days, there were recreation, where they make things like hamburger. The prison authorities are the ones that make the foods, then your visitors can buy for you from there. We lived basically for Saturdays. You can also buy some chips and cold drink, and keep that for the week ... Ja, the food was terrible. If we did not have visits from our families or the prison shop that opens once in about eight weeks, then I am sure we would have gone hungry ... It's sad for the other people [inmates] because there are some people that never had visitors while we were there" (Amelia).

These experiences of relying on family members for basic necessities or material comfort resonate with the reported experiences of female inmates in Cameroonian prisons (Linonge-Fontebo, 2013). However, in this study it was noteworthy that the participant with substantial financial means was less aware of the comfort her money brought and in her view she did not use her buying power to her benefit while she was incarcerated:

“If people [inmates] come in [into prison] and they have, maybe, one million rand, they do a lot with it. I was a lot stronger than one million rand, but I never used my money to do things for me in prison. The guards knew [her financial worth], the inmates later got to know because of the kinds of people that come to visit you, one of my houses was sold and they saw the receipt (Mercy).”

Mercy may have been oblivious to the impact that her money had on other inmates and the warders as she had the best correctional centre experiences among the participants of this study (especially after her wealth was realised). Her complaints focused mainly on the inefficiency of the correctional centre staff in attending to her medical problem (she had fibromyalgia) and the special diet that came with her medical condition.

At the other end of the spectrum was Elizabeth (incarcerated for murder) and from a poor family as explained above. Her family could not afford the transportation fare to visit her in the correctional centre; hence she had no visitors throughout her 36 months incarceration:

“It was tough for me because I did not have anybody from home to come visit me. I stayed in prison for three years. My mother she is poor. She doesn’t work. She is only having that money for grant. I also left my children for her. So, it was difficult for her. She did not have money for transport. I never saw my family or friends.”

She recounted her belief that lesbian women helped each other while incarcerated. She also engaged in a lesbian relationship and stressed the material benefits this gave her during her incarceration:

“I do [practiced a same-sex relationship in prison] once ... They [lesbians in prison] help each other; it was good because she [her partner] was helping me all the time because if her family they buy things for her, they buy for me too ... You can say no you don’t want [to engage in same-sex relationships] if you are new, but later, you start to want those things that they are doing because you see the way they help each other. So, even you too will start to think that if I do, I will have this and this and that” (Elizabeth).

Agboola (2015) describes how same-sex relationships in female correctional centres may start off as coerced, but later may become consensual, especially if linked with financial rewards. From the above accounts it is clear that one’s financial standing prior to incarceration impacts on one’s experiences inside correctional centres. The socio-economic importance that was attached to the crimes the inmates had committed influenced their interactions with the other inmates and warders. The inmates who committed financial crimes such as fraud, which other inmates regarded as more serious, felt that they were discriminated against in the correctional centres. Those who had committed other financially related crimes, such as shoplifting, which the other inmates regarded as less serious than fraud, were reportedly given better treatment:

“They [the warders and other female inmates] don't like us [inmates that commit “serious” financial crimes] inside prison. No matter our race, they hate us [chuckles]. They [both warders and other inmates] hate us because we had something to do with the stealing of money. Even though we told them that we paid back the money, they still hate us. We got a lesser sentence because we paid back some the money that we stole, but the inmates can't understand that ... we stole R1.8 million and paid back R830 000. We only owed three hundred and something thousand because I am a co-owner of the company that I defrauded, she [her co-accused and sister] was working for us. We went gambling, we withdraw money from the company account and go gamble” (Amelia).

The socio-economic status of the inmates sometimes influenced the interactions of the inmates and the warders:

“If a piece of chocolate is remaining [from the ones brought by the inmates' visitors and the inmates could not finish eating it during the visits], we not allowed to take it inside [back to their cells] but if they [warder] know they I have a rich boyfriend or rich family, then I can say to them [the warders] “you know I will bring you this and this and this”. Then the warden will allow me bring the chocolate in or whatever you want to bring inside” (Emily).

Inmates' access to financial means thus created power relations among inmates, and among them and the warders as described in everyday events and even sexual relationships. It is worth noting that the white participants seldom mentioned their racial category when referring to their lives prior to incarceration, but during incarceration their whiteness became more pronounced as they form part of a minority. The power relationships between the warders and inmates transpired as complicated and not to the advantage of the white participants as is shown in the next section.

### **Privilege and oppression**

South Africa's notorious racist past has also been reflected in the criminal system (Filippi, 2016). Many of the research participants in this study identified racial categorisation casually in conversing about elements related to their incarceration: “The investigator at Police station X was rude to me. He is a *white* guy.” (Emily, white South African, Greek by birth); “There was a lady called Theresa that I was with in prison. She is a *white* lady” (Lebohang, black South African).

Apart from frequently indicating other people's racial category, all the participants had to get along with fellow inmates of all racial categories and for some of them this was the first time in their lives: “You make friends. There's a lot of people there, it's not just bad people, there's good people. Any colour, black, white - there's good people. We've made a lot of good friends with black people” (Freda).

Even though people are locked up together regardless of their racial category, there are still racial tensions. Remarkably, all such tensions reported in this research were targeted at white inmates by black warders:

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- “Amelia: Everything in prison is about your colour. Everybody is a human being, no matter where you come from, but they don't like us.
- Interviewer: Who does not like you?
- Amelia: The officials. They don't like us [the inmates of different races] to mingle. They don't want us to be friends. When I have got a black friend, they don't like it.
- Interviewer: Why do you think that is?
- Amelia: I think it's got something to do with South Africa's background. You know, they are not over that yet. Prison would have been a good place to bridge the race gap because we all live in close quarters.
- Interviewer: What are the things that the warders do to discourage you from being friends with an inmate from a different race?
- Amelia: They always tell them [the black inmates] that remember our white people stinks. We [white people] don't wash our hair and hands. They [the black warders] encourage them [the black inmates] to hate us. They say all these in their language, during a meeting of all the inmates and staff. Our black friends come and tell us what was said about us after the meeting is over. It's not fair. We are all women. What's colour? It's what's inside a person that counts.”

The glaring “us” and “them” discourse above shows the deep divisions between people from different racial categories and how this is highlighted by different languages spoken, Amelia also narrated:

“One day, we [all the inmates and the correctional centre staff] were in a meeting in the prison courtyard, and the Captain [a black man] was addressing us. I then asked him, "Sir, when am I gonna see the parole board, because my time to be released is very near?" So, the Captain said something in his language, and then all the blacks [inmates and staff] started laughing. I did not understand what he said. He was degrading me in front of everybody. Later a black friend of mine came to tell me the meaning of what the Captain said, which was "If you have got shopping to do outside, then you should come and tell us, they must wait their turn". I mean in front of about three hundred people. It's still your life, you want to know when you are going to see the parole board.”

Although language is claimed by certain white participants as a tool to exclude and even degrade them, none of the white participants indicated that they tried to learn an African language whilst in the correctional centres. Other instances of perceived racism were also reported:

“All the time inside because I am white it is a problem. I am not a racist, the members [warders] were racist. During the week, you are not allowed to phone, unless you have a request to do so. Some of the black ladies [inmates] know the black members, and they will be allowed to phone, but if you [a white inmate] ask to make a phone call, the members don't allow you. It was very bad. Why will some inmates get privileges that the others don't? They [warders] say that you are lying all the time, for example, if you say that you want to phone your lawyer they say that you are lying and they don't allow you, but if a black lady [inmate] come allow her to phone without even asking her who she wants to phone” (Mercy, white South African).

White participants reported that they experienced racism only from the warders, not other inmates, a perception that is also shared by certain black participants:

“And in the prison, there is racism. They don’t treat us equal. When they come there [to prison], the whites, they [warders] don’t like them. There’s not many white warders, we only have one Indian warder. So, they [black warders] don’t treat the white inmates very well. They can tell them this is no longer your country, even if it’s not their fault. It’s not right.” (Valerie, black South African).

Burgess-Proctor’s (2006) argument that no group is entirely privileged is thus demonstrated in this research where white inmates are sometimes discriminated against exactly because of their former privilege as perceived by certain black warders. Anthias (in Levine-Rasky, 2011:242) argues in this regard that there is a *social position* that gave white participants access to symbolic and material resources. However, once they are incarcerated *social positioning* takes place where their positions are defined, negotiated and challenged. From these accounts this social positioning is simultaneously done by black warders, white and black inmates. The black inmates reportedly treated the white inmates more kindly (undoubtedly because they share being inmates) than black warders did, showing how racial categorisation are disrupted by other social positions such as being an inmate or a warder.

## CONCLUSION

By employing intersectionality as a lens when analysing the reported experiences of former female inmates in South Africa, it was shown that the type of crime the participants were incarcerated for could simultaneously be linked to their educational levels, income and often their racial category. Participants with tertiary qualifications and hence much higher monthly incomes (compared to the remaining participants) were all found guilty on charges of fraud. Similarly, all the women with low or no income prior to incarceration had lower formal educational levels and were found guilty on charges of shoplifting, and in one case for murder. The racial category of the participants was significant since the white participants all had a higher income and were more likely to have higher educational levels, and the black women had vastly different experiences based on their income and educational levels. Therefore, race on its own was not found to be a determining factor in this study for committed crimes, but if analysed in relation to educational levels, access to financial and social capital as well as income, distinct patterns are discernible that cannot be divorced from the different experiences white and black participants had in South Africa. Since race has permeated the life chances of all South Africans, it is clearly still orchestrating other aspects of life, including criminal activity and incarceration. This finding gives credence to an intersectional approach highlighting how multiple systems of inequality inform individual decisions of committing crime.

It was further shown that participants reported different treatment and experiences in the correctional centres, depending on their (perceived and real) access to financial resources. Women who were found guilty on charges of fraud and had family members who brought them tokens of material comfort had easier lives during incarceration. In one reported case, such material benefits were also extended to a lesbian partner who was from a poor background. At the same time, the privilege bestowed onto white South Africans in general meant that black warders did not always treat them equally in the correctional centres. The power dynamics between black warders and white inmates thus only benefitted white inmates if they shared their “wealth” with black warders, revealing complicated power relations informed by financial, racial and class positioning.

If education is seen as one of the most important aspect in lifting women out of poverty, economic crimes such as shoplifting may drop significantly. However, an argument can also be made that economic empowerment creates new opportunities for economic crime, such as certain forms of fraud. Closer attention should thus be given to the category of economic crimes. It may be that South African women, regardless of their socio-economic status, are more likely to commit economic crimes due to the financial burdens they have to carry. Many of the participants in this study live in single-parent households and hence the demands of supporting children and other family members and/or adhere to a certain lifestyle, may be an added factor in committing crime.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Apartheid refers to the enforced separate development policies of the South African government based on racial and ethnic categories. It was enforced especially during the National Party's reign from 1948 to 1994. Apart from forcing people to live separately, the policies benefitted white people at the expense of all other people.
2. Coloured is the racial category used during the apartheid years to refer to people of a mixed descent. Today the term is still used in official statistics.
3. Common South African exclamation that could indicate surprise or amazement.
4. General Afrikaans utterance literally meaning "yes".
5. Money may refer to commodities such as telephone cards and cigarettes that are of importance in correctional centres.

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